

The Need for Joint Fires Observer Program
EWS Contemporary Issues Paper
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To
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The current operational environment in Afghanistan and Iraq proved to the Army that they needed Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC) at the company level to effectively control Close Air Support (CAS). The Air Force, who supplies the Army with its JTACs, is currently unable to provide the number of JTACs the army requires. The Air Force has authorized an increase to their current structure that will allow them to produce 70 more JTACs a year, raising the number of JTACs from 622 in fiscal year (FY) 2005 to 1019 in FY 20012. To bridge this capabilities gap, the Army developed the Joint Fires Observer (JFO) program.¹

The JFO program focuses on teaching its students to pass information to a JTAC that will enable the JTAC to successfully employ CAS. Though the Marine Corps currently provides one air officer (AO) and two forward air controllers (FAC) to the maneuver battalions, this leaves one maneuver company without the capability sets necessary to control CAS. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are often conducted at the platoon level or lower. A FAC can not cover every patrol, check point, and convoy that his

¹ Peterson, William. (Maj, USA) *Joint Fires Observer Information Dec 2005.* Information paper.

maneuver company conducts. Furthermore, in the urban environment the relative distance between the lead element and the FAC may be too great for the FAC to deconflict aviation fires from friendly positions without well trained individuals to provide additional information. In the urban environment there is a clear requirement for these individuals to quickly and accurately provide the information necessary for the FAC to prosecute targets in order to prevent the targets from fleeing and avoid fratricide and unnecessary collateral damage. Currently the Marine Corps does not have a formal school that provides the training necessary for Marines to accrue these skill sets.

The Marine Corps provides an AO and FAC to its maneuver battalions, but this is not the case for provision units and units such as Military and Border Transition Teams, which conduct operations with a limited Marine presence. Often Transition Teams do not have AO let alone FACs. The Marine Corps needs to develop a JFO program similar to that of the Army's because the program can provide the capability that is needed in these maneuver elements.

The Army Joint Fire Observer Program

The Army JFO program is designed to help fill the void that currently exist between the number of JTACs the Army says it needs to conduct operations and what the Air Force can currently provide. The program focuses on training the "Company Fire Support Officers/NCOs, Platoon Forward Observers, Combat Observation Lasing Teams and members of scout/reconnaissance organizations."² These individuals will be taught the skill sets necessary to assist JTACs in conducting Type II and Type III CAS. The Army's goal is to have one JFO per maneuver platoon.³ The JFO Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), that has been signed between the Departments of Army and Air Force and the United States Special Operations Command, defines the JFO as: "A trained service member who can request, adjust, and control surface-to-surface fires, provide targeting information in support of Type II and III CAS terminal attack controls, and perform autonomous Terminal Guidance Operations (TGO)."⁴

Army JFO course is a 10 day course with 9 days of classroom instruction and simulation, followed by one final day of field training. The student is tested on the

² Ibid.

³ Yeager, Jeffrey W. (Col, USA, TRADOC). E-Mail interview by Author. 12 December 2007

⁴ JFO MOA, MOA between the U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff; U.S. Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff, Air and Space Operation; US-SOCom Director of Operations Support Group, 14 November 2005

theater air control system, aircraft and weapons, fire support control measures, aviation and laser/night brevity terms, and aircraft munitions. Each soldier conducts seven simulations under the supervision of a Joint Terminal Attack Controller Instructor (JTAC-I). These simulations include: Type I control, Type II control with a JTAC, Type II control with a laser and a JTAC, a Close Combat Attack (CCA) and AC-130 call for fire, Type II control with JTAC and Naval Gunfire, and Type II control in an urban environment utilizing a grid reference graphic (GRG). Graduates are required to conduct semi-annual training to maintain their currency. To maintain their proficiency they must conduct six rotary or fixed wing events, six call for fire events, and one AC-130 call-for-fire. These events can be either simulated or live.

Types of Close Air Support

To understand the employment of the JFO it is important to understand the three types of terminal control a JTAC/FAC uses to control CAS. The first is Type I, which requires the controller to "visually acquire the attacking aircraft and the target for each attack."⁵ Type II is the

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 3-09.3, Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support*.

second method of terminal control in which some or all the following conditions exist: "JTAC is unable to visually acquire the attacking aircraft at weapons release, JTAC is unable to visually acquire the target, or the attacking aircraft is unable to acquire the mark/target prior to weapons release."⁶ It is during Type II CAS that the JFO becomes the eyes of the controller, providing the controller with the required information to successfully employ aviation ordnance. The final method of terminal control is Type III. Type III provides "clearance for multiple attacks within a single engagement subject to specific attack restrictions.... During Type III control, JTACs provide attacking aircraft targeting restrictions and then grant a "blanket" weapons release clearance ("CLEARED TO ENGAGE"). Type III control does not require the JTAC to visually acquire the aircraft or the target."⁷

JFO Fills Capabilities Gap

The operational tempo of the maneuver company is extremely high in Iraq and Afghanistan. Often, operations are conducted at the platoon or squad level. The company

Washington, D.C. September 2003, incorporating Change 1 September 2005, chapter V, P 17.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

does not have the capability to support these operations with JTACs or FACs, this is also true with Military and Border Transition Teams. Without this capability in the maneuver element the delivery of aviation ordnance is extremely difficult.

Lacking a standard of training for observes the FAC or JTAC conducting Type II terminal control through an observer has no idea as to the level of training and understanding that the observer has of CAS procedures. The controller will have to take valuable time to ensure that the observer on the ground can do the following: communicate the effects the ordnance will have on the target and its surrounding to the on-scene commander, deconflict friendly locations, talk the aircraft and the JTAC on to the target, gain approval from on scene commander to release ordnance, and understand any restrictions the JTAC passes. This is no easy task for individuals that are trained in CAS procedures, let alone someone who is untrained and performing these tasks as a secondary function.

Through a standardized training program for observers, FACs/JTACs will be able to quickly establish a base line of understanding with the JFO. The JFO will understand the information that the aircraft and the controller will

require to successfully deliver ordnance. JFOs will have spent hours conducting simulations of multiple scenarios and have been tested on their understanding of CAS brevity terms, aviation ordnance, and CAS procedures. This training will decrease the friction that can exist with a none trained observer and increase the confidence of the aircrew and JTAC in the quality of information that the observer is providing. The JFOs will greatly reduce the time necessary to prosecute targets and the risk of fratricide. With JFOs organic to the using unit, the on-scene commander will already have a working relationship with the JFO and understand the JFOs responsibilities.

2d Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO), a unit that specializes in controlling supporting arms recognized the importance of this training and sent as many of their team chiefs as possible through the course. With the increase in Military transition teams ANGLICO new that they would be forced to split their teams up to support multiple operation. ANGLICO was able to send 11 Marines through the course before deploying back to Iraq in September of 2007.⁸

Fielding Options for the Marine Corps

⁸ Yeager, Jeffrey W. (Col, USA, TRADOC). E-Mail interview by Author. 12 December 2007.

The Marine Corps has several options to field a JFO program. The easiest option would be to sign the JFO MOA, which would presumably increase funding for the program and increase the number of students the schoolhouse would graduate. Without signing the MOA, the Army has the obligation to support its operational forces with school seats, so school seats available to Marines are usually on an audit basis. 2d ANGLICO sent students to the course in hopes that seats would open up due to no shows or failures. With the signing of the MOA the Marine Corps would have to provide support to the schoolhouse in return for valuable seats.

A second option is for the Marine Corps to start its own JFO program. With the Expeditionary Warfare Training Group (EWTG) Pacific/Atlantic as the lead for developing JTACs/FACs for the Marine Corps, they are an obvious choice. EWTG have the simulators and the resident knowledge to develop such a course. If EWTG started a JFO course it would require more funding and a larger staff to handle the increased course load. This would also provide the ability for JTAC/FAC students to observe the JFO program while attending their initial training so they can see exactly what type of training the JFO is receiving. EWTG would be able to develop a standardized package and

would be able to ensure that changes current tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) would be implemented.

A third option is to have the Air Officer of each Artillery Training School (ATS) run the program. This would require oversight by EWTG to ensure standardization in development and implemented changes. Camps Pendleton and Lejeune are fielding the simulators necessary to run the course and MEF/Division can support the simulations with JTACs/FACs. Located the school at ATS will provide the using units easy access to the schoolhouse and facilitate the direct integration of the JTAC/FAC with the JFO, who will most likely be working together during deployment.

Conclusion

Units such as ANGLICO have been doing JFO type training for a long time, but often the training that the Marines receive is only as good as the JTAC/FAC that the Marine works for. Standardized training developed by formal schools produces a product far superior to what individual units will be able to produce, and provides a base of knowledge recognized by all. By developing a JFO program or adopting the Army JFO program they will acquire the skill

sets necessary to ensure the successful employment of aviation assets.

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